

# Time Travel at the National Gallery of Art

by Nathalie Ryan and Vicki Toye

Have you ever wanted to travel back in time to experience another era? How far back would you like to go? Where would you like to go? Who would you like to meet? What historic event would you like to participate in? One way you can “time travel” is by watching films. Film can bring history alive, help you visualize what people and places looked like in the past, and prompt you to imagine what life was like in other times. This fall you and your family can experience life on a Yorkshire farm in the 1940s through the imaginative filmmaking of director Harley Cokeliss. On 4 October, as part of its Children’s Film Program, the National Gallery of Art will screen *An Angel for May*, a time-travel tale of adventure and fantasy based on the award-winning book by Melvin Burgess. Filmed on location in South Yorkshire, England, the film stars two youngsters—Matthew Beard (age 12) as Tom and Charlotte Wakefield (age 10) as May—and features Tom Wilkinson (*In the Bedroom*, *The Full Monty*) as Sam.

*An Angel for May* takes audiences on a journey back to England of the 1940s. After accidentally tumbling through a magical time portal, a twelve-year-old schoolboy named Tom realizes that he has been transported from the present back to the time of World War II. He finds himself on a thriving farm run by Sam Wheeler, who is looking after a war orphan named May. With a sheepdog called Tess as his time-travel guide, Tom makes many friends on the farm and is especially attached to May. When Tom returns to the present, he discovers the fate of his friends from the past and takes on the dangerous task of rewriting history.

In this thoughtfully crafted tale, plot lines in both time periods are carefully interwoven as Tom journeys back and forth through time. We see the story through his eyes and are, therefore, as surprised as he is by how the story ends. Cokeliss wanted to

create a film that would appeal to the entire family: “[*An Angel for May*] is a heartwarming emotional story about the power of unconditional love to transform people’s lives. I have been very pleased by the audience’s response to the film. Not only do they get caught in Tom’s journey, both emotional and physical, but it speaks to them of their lives.” Making connections across time and generations, *An Angel for May* is a story of caring and hope that the entire family can share. We invite you to join us at the National Gallery of Art for the Washington D.C. premiere of *An Angel for May*.

Vicki Toye, assistant curator of film, and Nathalie Ryan, coordinator of family and youth programs, at the National Gallery of Art (NGA) recently talked with director Harley Cokeliss (HC) about the making of *An Angel for May*. This interview is designed for parents to share with their children.

NGA: What drew you to the story of *An Angel for May*?

HC: I was drawn to the book by its emotional impact. Melvin Burgess wrote a book with heart. I, as a reader, cared about the outcome of the story, how Tom would resolve his predicament, what would happen to May, what would happen to Rosie, and I thought that an audience would feel the same way. The book was about unconditional love and loss and how one person could make a difference in a world in turmoil and I wanted to put that on the screen.

NGA: What does it mean to be a director of a feature film, or of any film? How does the director relate to other behind-the-scenes people, as well as to actors in front of the camera?

HC: The director of the film is the storyteller. Filmmaking is a collaborative art. That means many people bring their separate and special skills to the project and work together to a common purpose. However many people work on a film, there needs to be one guiding spirit whose job it is to channel all the talent and energy of the people behind the camera and the people in front of the camera to achieve that common goal, which is to tell the story as well as possible. That's the director's job.

The director will usually be the one person who sees the film all the way through the many different stages of production. In my case, in 1996 I pulled a book off the shelf of a bookstore in London, read the book, and wanted to make a film of it. I worked with a writer on the script for four years. Not constantly, because during those four years of script development I made other films and the writer wrote other things, but we kept going back to the script of *An Angel for May* until we were satisfied we had the story right. In the process of developing the script the story that was in the book had to be adapted, changed, so that it would work well as a filmed drama. Once the script is right, the director is then often involved in the raising of the money to make the film. That took us over two years. Once you have your funding, you start pre-production. That means you start casting the roles and selecting the crew. The director is instrumental in choosing the people who will work on both sides of the camera. He (or she) is looking for the actors who will bring the characters to life. Finding the right children to play Tom and May was especially difficult and took a very long time. It wasn't the finding of good actors that took the time, but rather choosing between several good actors and selecting the best ones for the roles. The choice was agonizing, but in the end we were very pleased with Matthew Beard as Tom and Charlotte Wakefield as May. They did a remarkable job. The director also has to choose the talented artists and technicians who have the skills to help him create his vision. He has to choose a cameraman to light the film, an operator to handle the camera, a designer to create the sets, a costume designer to

dress the actors, an editor to cut the film together, a composer to write music, and on and on. Many people will help the director achieve his vision, but there has to be one voice who can say, "Yes, that's right," or "no, that doesn't work." That's the director. One person can paint a picture, one person can compose music, but to make a film you need a team of people, each one bringing something special to the process and looking to the director for guidance. In a way the director is the guardian of the story. It is his job to cherish and protect the story and bring it safely into the cinema.

NGA: How did you re-create so well the landscapes, sounds, and feelings from the World War II era?

HC: England is a very old country. There is history everywhere you look. Some of the villages where we filmed hadn't changed much since the nineteenth century, and all we had to do was remove the telltale modern signs of the present day: the television antennae, the posters and billboards, the cars. We also had to change some of the paint work on some of the buildings because the way we use color has changed a lot in the last sixty years. And some of the old buildings had modern doors and windows that we had to cover.

The farmhouse where we filmed so much of the story was built over 200 years ago, but we still had to remove some modern additions that had been done over the years. It was empty when we arrived; we had to bring, and in some cases build, everything you see on the farm and in the farmhouse. The clothing came both from costume rental companies and from stores that sell old clothes. Often we would work from photos in old magazines to get ideas about how people dressed in the 1940s. The army vehicles we got from people who collect, maintain, and rent them to film and television companies. Our vehicles have been in many film and television programs, such as *Band of Brothers*. The owners of the vehicles also got to dress up in uniform and be the drivers as well!

NGA: What is your favorite sequence or part of the film, and why?

HC: My favorite part was when we had most of the actors together on the farm. It was very busy and it felt like we had brought the past to life. There are so many sequences I like; it's hard for me to choose one.

NGA: The young actor who played Tom is a very gifted performer and served to truly anchor the film and the story. How did you find him? Do you enjoy working with child actors?

HC: I had two casting directors, who scoured both the acting schools in London and the drama classes in the Yorkshire area. We went through a series of auditions, a selection process that gradually came down to four possible Toms and four possible Mays. We then had a workshop where each possible Tom played scenes with each possible May. That was sixteen possible combinations. By the end of the day we were very tired but knew we had chosen the right young actors. Matthew had done some local television, but had never worked on a film before. I was struck by how direct and honest he was as an actor. What he did felt real. He was a real boy. Just what we needed for our hero.

I have done four films that featured young actors, and have a good rapport with them. It's the director's job to keep the actors focused on what the scene needs and to keep the actors in the right mood. Children enjoy make-believe; maybe that's why they make good actors.

NGA: The dog was an important part of the film. How did you find the dog? Was the dog easy to train and fun to work with?

HC: We found the dog through a professional animal trainer. There were two trainers in the part of Yorkshire where we were filming. They both brought in a dog for an audition. Being sheepdogs, they were both very clever and followed the instructions of their trainer. The difference was that one dog was quite young and new to filming. He was a bit nervous. Whereas Tess, though also a young dog, had already worked on a number of films and was so relaxed that she was always falling asleep when she wasn't needed! She was calm and friendly, and totally obedient to her trainer. Everyone in the cast and crew liked her, though the trainer told people not to make too much of a fuss over her so she could "bond" with the two children. In the film you can see many examples of how relaxed and comfortable Tess was (that's her real name, by the way). The trainer told me a secret. She said that dogs don't know they are acting; they think everything happening is for real. That's why dogs are such good actors.

NGA: How do you see your experience of re-creating a world at war, especially with our struggles with war today, and what message would you like kids to hear from stories that are inspired by these struggles?

HC: All you have to do is watch the news on television and read the newspapers to see that children are caught up in conflicts all over the world. I'd like the children watching my film to remember that each time they see a child suffering in the news, it is a child like them, and maybe—just like May—that child has lost parents, siblings, or friends. We are all people. We all share the same emotions. I'd like to think that the children of today can build a better world where people are kinder to each other.

NGA: The compassion of young Tom certainly demonstrates the great strength and generosity of which children are capable. Thank you, Harley, for giving us this behind-the-

scenes peek into the production of *An Angel for May*. We are proud to share your film with our audiences.

Recommended for children ages 7 and up, *An Angel for May* (Harley Cokeliss, Great Britain, 100 mins.) will be shown on Saturday, 4 October, at 10:30 a.m. in the National Gallery of Art's East Building Auditorium, located on Fourth Street at Constitution Avenue. This feature will be accompanied by the short animated film *The Hedge of Thorns* (Anita Killi, Norway, 13 mins.), a touching response to the conflict in the former Yugoslavia.

The National Gallery's year-long Children's Film Program presents a broad range of recently produced foreign and domestic films, including live-action and animated productions, as well as films made by children. The Children's Film Program offers the Gallery's large family audience innovative film programming, enhances the enjoyment of the collections and exhibitions, and fosters an appreciation of film as an art form. All children's film programs are free and no registration is required. Seating is offered on a first-come, first-seated basis. For up-to-date information on the current month's films, please call the Children's Film Program information line at (202) 789-4995 or visit our Web site at [www.nga.gov/kids](http://www.nga.gov/kids). The Children's Film Program is made possible by the generous support of *washingtonpost.com*. For information about other family programs at the National Gallery of Art, call (202) 842-6254.